

Wisconsin Libraries, 2008-2009

Progress, Challenges, and
Recommendations

Biennial Report
Council on Library and Network Development
July 10, 2009

By statute, on or before July 1 of every odd-numbered year, COLAND is required to transmit to the state superintendent a descriptive and statistical report on the condition and progress of library services in the state and recommendations on how library services in the state may be improved. [Wisconsin Statutes s. 43.07 (5)]

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Introduction

Wisconsin's libraries are more heavily used than ever—and they are more important than ever. During the current economic recession, many are turning to their library for help finding a job or for improving their job skills. Wisconsin's libraries of all types connect the state's residents to a world of information and knowledge. Because the economy of the future is increasingly based on knowledge, good libraries are one key to restoring and maintaining a healthy state economy and a bright future for all residents of Wisconsin.

Wisconsin now has:

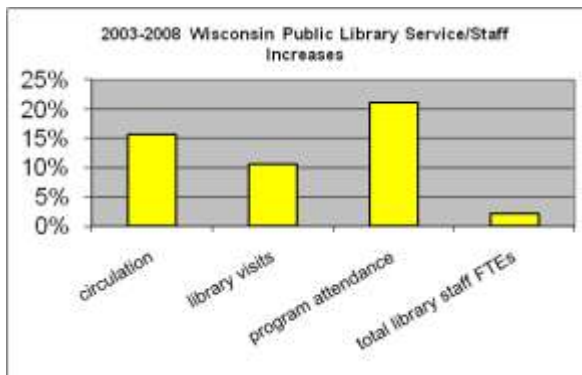
- 385 public libraries provide 457 facilities that serve 5.7 million state residents
- approximately 2,000 public school library media centers serving about 880,000 students
- hundreds of academic and special libraries serving students, professionals, businesses and others

All of these libraries make important contributions to the education and quality of life for Wisconsin residents, and to the economic health of the state. A recently completed research study of Wisconsin's school library media programs shows that high-quality school libraries correlate with high student achievement, and a 2008 study showed that investments in Wisconsin's public libraries return over \$4 for every dollar invested.

The public benefits of library service in Wisconsin are enhanced through high levels of interlibrary cooperation. Wisconsin's libraries cooperate through regional library systems and statewide services and organizations. Every year, millions of library items are shared among all types of libraries throughout the state. This statewide sharing of library materials means that everyone in Wisconsin has access to over 7 million titles owned by Wisconsin libraries of all types. Resource sharing is also a cost-effective method of avoiding unnecessary duplication of purchasing.

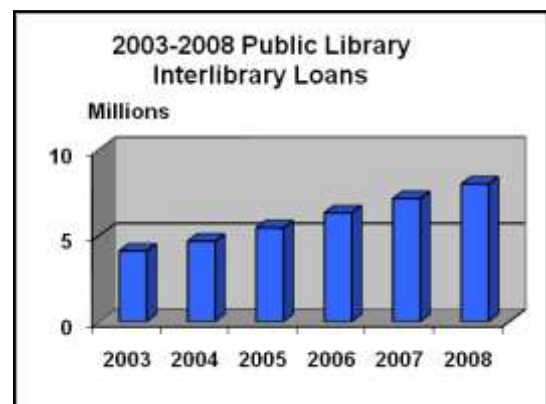
Progress

Library use in Wisconsin continues to grow at a rapid pace; however, reduced funding is threatening library service levels at a time when library service is more important than ever to Wisconsin residents.



While Wisconsin's population has increased 3 percent from 2003 to 2008, public library use has grown at a much faster rate. As shown on the graph to the left, public library service levels have increased dramatically. However, during this period, total library staffing increased by only about 2 percent. This indicates that public libraries have been relying on relatively stable staffing levels to provide higher and higher levels of library service to the public.

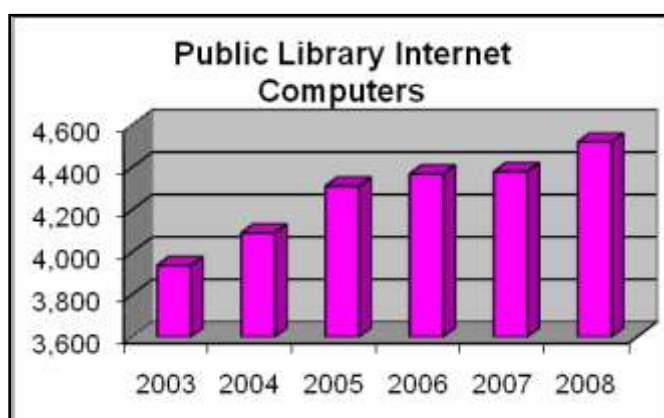
Wisconsin now ranks #1 nationally in per capita public library interlibrary loans. Public library system efforts to develop shared integrated computer systems have greatly contributed to the accessibility and growth of resource sharing. Currently, 92 percent of Wisconsin residents live in the service areas of the 349 public libraries participating in shared integrated systems. Interlibrary loans continued the double-digit annual growth that began in the mid 1990s. This increase in interlibrary loans has been supported by a corresponding expansion of regional and statewide interlibrary delivery services, an activity heavily supported by public library systems.





Wisconsin has also made great progress in providing statewide access to electronic resources through the BadgerLink program. Established by the DPI in 1998, BadgerLink provides online access to information resources for Wisconsin residents in cooperation with the state's public, school, academic, and special libraries. Through statewide contracts, BadgerLink provides access to more than 1,500 newspapers and more than 14,000 magazines and books. BadgerLink patrons conduct about 18 million searches yearly.

Wisconsin libraries of all types have been leaders in the use of technology to increase the information available to library users.



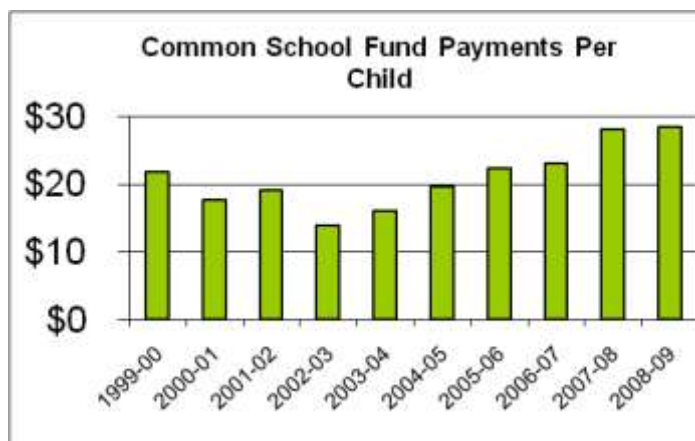
Wisconsin's public school library media centers now provide a total of over 32,000 computers for the use of their students in completing class assignments and research. Wisconsin's TEACH program has been instrumental in making high-speed Internet connections available to Wisconsin's schools and libraries. All Wisconsin academic, school and public libraries now have Internet connections, and almost all now have high-speed Internet access.

The number of Internet-connected public-use computers available at public libraries increased 15 percent between 2003 and 2008,

to over 4,500. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation distributed 743 PCs and servers to 235 Wisconsin public libraries and branches in 2003, and the Gates Foundation continues to provide grants to the DPI to support public access computing in Wisconsin public libraries.

Currently, 345 Wisconsin public libraries with service areas including 97% of the state's population offer free wi-fi service to library visitors. In 2005, only 101 public libraries offered wireless service.

The Common School Fund, one of the trust funds set up by the Wisconsin Constitution, funds the purchase of books and other instructional resources for school libraries. The annual earnings of the Common School Fund are distributed on a per pupil basis each spring. In 2008-09, \$35.3 million was distributed to Wisconsin's 426 school districts, which amounts to \$28.37 per child. Common School Fund aid now represents the only source of funding for the purchase of school library materials in most school districts. While Common School Fund aid has generally been stable, it has been threatened by legislative attempts to divert for other purposes the funds going into the Common School Fund.





Research shows that the very earliest experiences in a child's life have significant long-term effects on how that child will learn and develop. Consequently, with encouragement from the DPI's Early Learning Initiative, more and more public libraries are providing programs for children ages 0-5 and their parents to provide experiences giving young children the best possible start to life and learning. Between 2003 and 2008, attendance at public library programs for children of all ages in Wisconsin increased by 31 percent.

Statewide assessments of reading achievement show that the proportion of students proficient in reading declines as they move from elementary and middle school to high school. In May 2008, the Division for Libraries, Technology and Community Learning launched a multi-year initiative that will champion high-quality library services to teens and build momentum behind Wisconsin's drive to create the most literate, well-educated citizenry and workforce in the nation.

Wisconsin libraries of all types are expanding services beyond the walls of their libraries by digitizing library materials and making them available on the Internet. With the help of DPI-awarded federal Library Services and Technology (LSTA) grants, many libraries have contributed to the over 1 million digital items available at Wisconsin Heritage Online (wisconsinheritage.org). Also with the assistance of LSTA grants, many Wisconsin libraries of all types are cooperating to provide 24/7 virtual reference service through the AskAway program (www.askaway.info). Any Wisconsin resident can use AskAway to submit a request for help with research or general information needs that will be answered by reference librarians throughout the state, nationally, and globally.



LSTA grants totaling \$200,000 were awarded in 2009 to help public libraries address the needs of those who have been most affected by the recent economic downturn. These funds are being used to help libraries collaborate with local, regional, and state agencies that are already working to help those who are unemployed, underemployed, or seeking to improve their job skills.

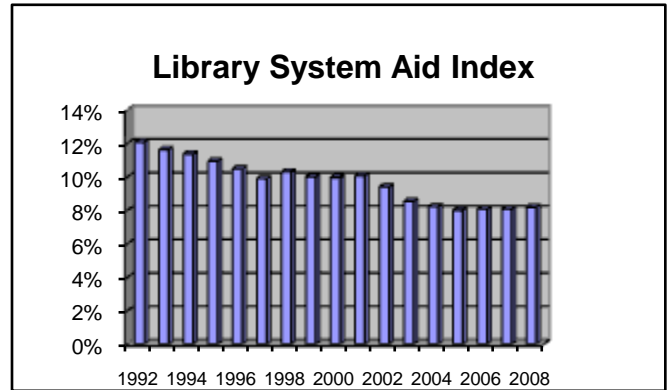
A visioning summit to plan for the future of Wisconsin libraries was held in 2008, co-sponsored by the DPI and COLAND. A number of the key findings of that summit are incorporated into the recommendations at the end of this document.

Challenges

While Wisconsin's libraries have made significant progress, they also face challenges.

- The current economic downturn has resulted in loss of funding and in service cut-backs for libraries of all types. This is particularly unfortunate because library services are essential to people who are looking for a job, training for a new career, or seeking a diploma or degree.
- Some state agency offices, including job centers, have closed—putting greater burdens on public libraries to serve job seekers and others needing government services.
- Despite the fact that many studies show the importance of high-quality school libraries to student achievement, many school districts have cut school library staff positions and material funding. Currently, 25% of the state's elementary schools, 38% of the middle schools, and 48% of the high schools do not have library media specialists at the levels recommended by the DPI. Students will benefit if more schools have adequate levels of school library staff and materials.
- Over the past 30 years, Wisconsin's 17 public library systems have developed strong programs of service to their 385 member libraries, including resource sharing and open access for all state residents. Participation in public library systems is voluntary, and the public library system aid program is the primary state mechanism to support public library services in Wisconsin. Public

library system aid, which is targeted at 13 percent of local and county library expenditures, decreased to an estimated 8 percent in 2005, which was the lowest state index level of funding in the past 20 years. The legislature and governor approved public library system funding aid increases for 2007 to 2009, which have helped to offset prior funding reductions. However, funding in 2010 is expected to decrease by over 3%.



- Academic and special libraries, especially, are threatened by rapidly increasing journal prices and other increased costs. In recent years, the average price for journal titles purchased by academic libraries has increased by 7 to 9% per year. This increase is well in excess of general inflation and has created great difficulties particularly for academic and special library budgets and service levels.
- Numerous Wisconsin special libraries have even been closed in recent years, including medical, corporate and legal libraries.
- Reduced revenue, levy limits and revenue caps combined with rapidly increasing costs (including costs for books, health insurance and utilities) have induced many schools and municipalities to reduce library services, staff and hours open.
- Government services and information are increasingly available only online, placing greater demands on libraries to provide computers, sufficient bandwidth, and staff assistance to help the public gain access to these services and information.
- Constantly increasing bandwidth demands have caused service disruptions at libraries across the state.

Key Recommendations

A healthy state economy and a bright future for all Wisconsin residents will require high-quality school, public, academic, and special libraries. To achieve this future, COLAND recommends that:

- A summit should be held including school administrators, school board members, parents and others to address the issue of reduced staffing in school library media centers.
- The DPI should continue to allocate federal LSTA funds to support library services that assist job seekers and those who want to improve their job skills.
- Training must be available to ensure that all Wisconsin library staff have the skills necessary to provide 21st century library service to all Wisconsin residents.
- Wisconsin should provide 13% index level funding for public library systems. Wisconsin's public library systems have a proven track record of cost-effective services provided in cooperation with member libraries and member counties. These services, including resource sharing and open access, are threatened if the funding index level continues at a level below 13%.
- Wisconsin should remove arbitrary levy limits and revenue caps that interfere with local decision-making about the quality of local libraries.
- The Common School Fund must be protected for its constitutional purpose—the purchase of school library materials.
- Wisconsin should fully fund the statewide resource library contracts and expand the resources available through BadgerLink. These statewide resources cost-effectively expand the information available to Wisconsin libraries and to all residents of the state.
- Efforts should be made to reduce barriers to the ability of Wisconsin residents to use any library they choose.
- Using federal American Recovery and Reinvestment funds, fiber connections should be provided to all Wisconsin public libraries and schools to ensure bandwidth needed for future growth.